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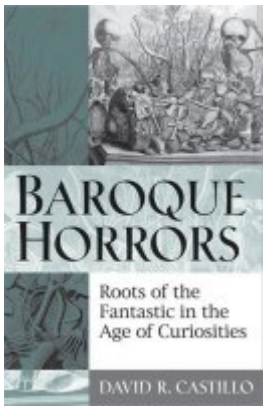
David R. Castillo. *Baroque Horrors: Roots of the Fantastic in the Age of Curiosities.* University of Michigan Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-472-11721-5

Reviewed by Natasha Simonova, University of Edinburgh



David R. Castillo's study announces itself as a 'gallery of horrors' curated from Early Modern literature, akin to the *Wunderkammern* (cabinets of curiosities) assembled by Renaissance collectors. Some of its exhibits involve supernatural visitation, such as the familiar-sounding ghost story narratives of haunted houses and brave men being driven mad by nocturnal visions included in Antonio de Torquemada's 1570 miscellany collection, *Jardin de flores curiosas* (*The Garden of Curious Flowers*). Others are strictly man-made horrors: in one of the novellas in Maria de Zayas' *Desengaños amorosos* (*Disenchantments of Love*, first published in 1647), a dishonoured woman is sealed up within a house wall by her family, kept alive for six years until 'her very flesh was eaten up to the thighs with wounds and worms, which filled the stinking place' (117).

The aim of *Baroque Horrors* is to highlight the similarities between this kind of 'baroque fantasy' and later developments in Gothic and horror writing, from the novels of Ann Radcliffe to H.P. Lovecraft and *The Invasion of the Body-Snatchers*. Engaging with broader questions of intellectual and political history, Castillo also seeks to link the 'dreams and fears' of baroque literature with 'the origins and meaning of the modern episteme,' as well as 'look[ing] back at the baroque period in search for the roots' of aspects of postmodern culture: the lack of fixed reality and authenticity, 'the commodification of nature' and the body 'and the horror vacui that accompanies it', along with the political discourse of empire (xiii-iv). This connection between postmodernity and the Early Modern is not new: it was made at least as early as 1984, when Umberto Eco (in his 'Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*') wondered 'if postmodernism is not the modern name for mannerism as a metahistorical category.' The transhistorical link is most relevant for Castillo, however, in so far as these aspects of our culture contribute to conceptions of horror.

The prehistory of the fantastic is a fruitful field, for both students of the Early Modern period and contemporary genre fiction. Of course, any book concerned with the 'Roots of the Fantastic' risks taking a overly-selective, teleological approach, familiar from classic early studies of the 'Rise of the Novel': the author must walk a fine line between reading these texts in their own context and as generic forerunners. Yet while Castillo's work offers interpretations of some strange and wonderful texts, it fails to supply a convincing overarching argument about these diverse fictions. *Baroque Horrors* gives little accounting for the chronological and generic breadth of the texts examined (roughly 1550-1680), or of exactly what – apart from echoes of later developments – the successive pieces in this 'gallery' might have in common. Perhaps it is that they all aim, for whatever reason, to excite combined fear and fascination in their audience, but this is left implicit. Similarly, the nature of the 'baroque' itself is not adequately explicated except with reference to the modern and postmodern, which is itself defined as 'neobaroque.' The author frequently describes Early Modern works as being 'pre-' or 'proto-' 'romantic'/'gothic', comparing them to later texts, from the stories of Sheridan Le Fanu and H.P. Lovecraft to the DVD blurbs of contemporary B movies. However, this methodology is only sometimes illuminating – texts from different eras may resemble without explaining each other – and least so when it leads to somewhat gratuitous (and necessarily already-dated) allusions to American politics.

The introductory chapter gives an extensive discussion of the recently-popular 'Body Worlds' exhibits of plastinated corpses staged by the German anatomist Gunther von Hagens (whose work is described as the epitome of both baroque and postmodern culture), as well as to the various valences of the 'curious.' *Baroque Horrors* is at its strongest, however, when analysing particular Early Modern texts, mixing plot summaries with a synthesis of previous criticism. Subsequent chapters are organized by genre and theme, with some authors featuring multiple times – from the 'curiosity' collections of the miscellanies, to moral exemplary tales and Cervantes's subversion of them in a nested story about talking dogs, to Zayas' graphic depiction of the buried horrors of patriarchy, and lastly a discussion of subsumed racial fears reflected in Spanish writing. When it comes to many of these texts (particularly *La cueva de Hércules* in the final section), the handling feels briefer than it could be – some works receive only a cursory glance, while lengthy quotations from others are not always subjected to the close analysis they merit. The most convincing passages combine postmodern reading with an admission of critical defeat: baroque fictions are seen as 'anamorphic figures that resist our critical attempts to make sense of them from univocal or totalizing explanatory schemes' (134). In fact, in the case of Cervantes' *El coloquio de los perros*, it is precisely 'the shock of the preternatural, the monstrous, and the marvelous' that 'adds to the ambiguity of the text and its resistance to monological views' (97). The image of the anamorphic skull, taken from Hans Holbein's painting of 'The Ambassadors', serves as a striking emblem for the reading of baroque literature.

It should be clear by now that 'baroque' (whatever else it means) for this book's purposes effectively stands for the Spanish Golden Age. While *Baroque Horrors* is intended for 'specialists, students and readers of early modern literature in the Spanish and Anglophone traditions as well as anyone interested in horror fantasy' (xiii), and all the Spanish is also given in translation, more introduction would have been useful for the Anglophone reader first encountering these works and students of later fantastic literature who might be less familiar with the Early Modern context. Moreover, while Castillo claims that this selection of works 'is representative of the pan-European constellation of curiosities' (1), the interchangeable use of 'early modern', 'baroque', and 'Spanish' leads to some misleading

statements, particularly where religion is concerned – the focus is naturally on the Counter-Reformation, and acknowledgement of Protestant Europe remains slight and unsubstantiated.

There is certainly nothing wrong with a monograph devoted solely to the fantastic in 16th- and 17th-century Spain, but considering its broad overall framing, the narrowness in actual focus exposes gaps in the book's use of context. When it comes to discussions of literary miscellanies or the impact of scientific and geographic exploration, non-Spanish Early Modern literature might make a more useful point of comparison than does later fiction and film. For instance, in a section on 'nocturnal horror' and the epistemological crisis occasioned by the astronomical discoveries of the 17th century, Blaise Pascal is only mentioned briefly in a footnote, and his most succinct statement of existential terror (*Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie*) is not quoted. Other texts, like John Donne's famous summary of the topsy-turvy effect of the new heliocentric universe in the 'The First Anniversary', might have provided better examples of what Castillo is discussing than does the Spanish material, none of which actually refers to astronomical space.

Apart from general theorists like Julia Kristeva, whose conception of the 'abject' Castillo seeks to qualify in relation to these texts, most of the criticism referred to is also based in Iberian studies. Castillo's manner of citing other critics is somewhat awkward – footnotes supply full quotations just after they have been closely paraphrased within the text, leading to considerable amounts of repetition. Better incorporation of this material might have strengthened the book's argument, while highlighting its original contribution to the field – as it stands, most of the more significant ideas in *Baroque Horrors* (such as its reading of the *Desengaños* as a gothic and feminist text) appear to come from outside sources. As a resource for scholars, the volume is also marred by frequent second-hand citations and omission of page numbers.

Despite its shortcomings and somewhat misleading title, however, *Baroque Horrors* provides a stimulating introduction to a set of dark and fascinating texts less well-known in Anglophone circles. As a 'gallery of horrors,' it may be seen as taking the place of the kind of literary miscellany it describes, and the snippets of primary sources in translation provide its most compelling content. Anyone developing an interest in the subject, however, might find more substance elsewhere.

About the Author – Natasha Simonova

Natasha Simonova has written 1 articles on The Gothic Imagination.

Natasha Simonova is a PhD student in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, working on the development of prose fiction continuations in the 17th and early 18th centuries. Her main interests are in ideas of authorship, intertextuality, and genre fiction.